

## Starting a New Position During a Global Pandemic

By: Neera Roopsingh

When I accepted a position as an associate attorney at SWC, the world still was a normal place. The Coronavirus was a distant idea relegated to the Far East. In fact, just prior to accepting the offer, I took a trip to Singapore and Malaysia and there, it was business as usual. The only clue that there was any concern about the Coronavirus was a non-descript daily temperature check at my hotel in Singapore, so the idea of an outbreak, much less a global pandemic, seemed far-fetched.

After a few years of solid municipal law practice under my belt in the public sector, I was ready to make the transition from government to private practice. How was I to foresee that the exciting but challenging and oftentimes nerve-wracking prospect of starting a new position, especially at a private practice law firm, a world completely foreign to what I was used to, would turn out to be invaluable lessons about being a lawyer and the practice of law.

My first day of work was March 16, and although Coronavirus had reached our shores and had just a week prior, been declared an official pandemic, I naively expected a normal first day. This expectation was accompanied by the obligatory “first day at work” anxiety and nerves. However, my expectation was far from my experience. I arrived at 9:30 as instructed and instead of encountering a full house of staff and attorneys busy at work, I was one of a couple of people in the office. Although, I knew a few of the attorneys from previous interactions and cases, there were no first day introductions, no small talk with new co-workers, and no opportunity to make individual connections with my future colleagues. I was given a primer in all things office by Stephanie, our assistant office manager, and left to my own devices with my assignments. Feeling forlorn, I delved into a research assignment, but little did I know that everyone was busy putting in place a plan to take the practice entirely remote. The firm had great foresight in preparing for the worst, and weeks prior, began to put in place a plan to continue our everyday operations remotely, as seamlessly as possible. At the end of my first full week, Governor Cuomo issued an Executive Order mandating all non-essential businesses work remotely. For the first time, I began to think that this was the worst possible time to make a move. I packed up a box full of cases and assignments, made sure my remote application was running smoothly, and out the door I went, not knowing what would come next.

What would come next, would be a work experience which we would all get to know, and weirdly adapt to, and to some degree become comfortable with. Suits and dresses were quickly replaced with yoga pants, my work desk was now my dining room table, and if I am being honest, the couch was a close second, and off course CNN was on in the background with a tireless loop of one ominous Coronavirus related story after another.

Working remotely from home was more challenging than I had anticipated. In the beginning, connectivity issues bogged me down for the better part of most mornings. Faye, our office manager, exhausted all avenues of alleviating this issue, but it was out of her hands, as the whole world was attempting to work remotely at the same time. Time to change perspective and adapt. I adapted my work schedule--I simply began working later into the evening to accommodate for connectivity issues.

Michael, our Managing Partner, sent nightly words of encouragement and thanks to everyone and reminded us to think about the great sacrifices being made by health care and front-line workers to keep us all safe. Appreciation and gratitude, great thoughts to end a long remote workday.

Weekly office meetings began the first week of the stay at home order. We were all learning how to adapt to this way of connecting. These meetings eventually happened several times a week, and although I missed the informal office chit-chats and the ease of walking into someone's office to seek out advice or guidance on assignments, it was great to be connecting and collaborating. These meetings allowed me to get a feel of the firm's culture, an experience which I really valued. We would eventually get so adept at virtual meetings that soon we were conducting board meetings and hearings with municipalities and clients. A lesson in adaptability and growth.

As a new attorney at the firm, I needed to learn the style of each member and partner. This was particularly difficult as most of the time it was trial by error. Assignments took longer than I expected and I felt less productive than I wanted to. Luckily, everyone understood that this experience was difficult and showed me great patience. Patience, I need to remember this for the future!

As the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, we adapted and grew. Three months later, I joined my colleagues as we are all learning to deal with returning to the office in a new landscape affected by the Coronavirus. During this time, I learned so many lessons about the practice of law and about the type of lawyer I want to become. I have learned that looking at the big picture and planning in anticipation of issues will guard against adverse outcomes. I have learned a change in perspective, and course of action are key to overcoming obstacles, that it is imperative to be able to adapt to new situations, that gratitude and thanks should permeate all areas of life, and lastly, the value of patience.